

Duxbury Tercentenary Committee
Duxbury, Massachusetts
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FORD'S STORE

Duxbury Tercentenary Series
For release week of June 6th
About 1200 words

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AMERICA'S OLDEST DEPARTMENT STORE

As part of the Duxbury Tercentenary Celebration, which takes place early next month, there is being published this week under the editorship of Dr. H. C. Bumpus, a volume entitled "The Story of Duxbury, 1637 to 1937, which unfolds chapters in Duxbury's early history hitherto unrevealed. Duxbury, according to this Commemorative volume was the first town to buy land from the Indians and receive a deed from their chief. The deed to the purchased land is in existence, the property of the Old Bridgewater Historical Society.

Bearing the signature of Massasoit - a human hand of which the index finger points to the terms of the agreement - the deed reads: (quote)

"In consideration of the aforesaid bargain and sale, we, the said Myles Standish, & Samuel Nash, and Constant Southworth, do bind ourselves to pay unto the said Ousamequin, for and in consideration of the said tract of land, as followeth: - Seven coats, a yard and a half in a coat, nine hatchets, eight hoes, twenty knives, four moose skins, ten yards and a half of cotton." (end quote) It was then signed by the three ~~afo~~rementioned men.

Among the wealth of incidents, biographical material and historical data with which the book is filled there is a history of the establishment and growth of the oldest department store in America. The details are as follows:

During the war of 1812, when the British blockade shut off the supply of sail-cloth required by the ship-builders of Duxbury, the Weston firm, largest of the shipbuilders, promptly organized the Duxbury Woolen and ~~Woolen~~ ^{Cotton Manufacturing} Company. The company was taken over later by Nathaniel Ford and his two brothers, James and Peleg. Under the firm name of James T. Ford and Company, the brothers produced sacks, yarns, trowels, meal and cloth. They established a wide market for their satinet, an imitation satin made with cotton warp and ~~was~~ wool filling.

In conjunction with their mill, which was an adjunct to the store, the Fords operated a sloop, the Mink, commanded by Captain Timothy Trusty. Their vessel left Duxbury with products of the mill, and brought back from other ports raw materials for processing, and

well as merchandise to be distributed at their retail store. Much of their product was sold for cash in Boston and other Massachusetts coastal towns.

The Ford account book of 1829, which is now in the possession of the Misses Harriet and Florence Ford, granddaughters of Nathaniel, records the shipment of two cases of satinot aboard the Mink to Shaw and Tiffany, of Baltimore, in exchange for southern corn to be ground into a new "Johnnycake material."

The Misses Ford also have some of the recipes for dyes, and drafts of some patterns which were used at the mill. One recipe calls for copperas and logwood for making black dye, another for alum, nutgall and copperas. One of the drafts prescribes quote thirty two spools of white, two of blue, two of white and blue twisted for the filling; warp of gray."(unquote) There are directions for making gay cloth in which blue, deep blue and orange are combined, and for a gray shawl with a bright plaid border.

For almost ninety years the mill connected with the store was operated. During its later years its work was confined to weaving. Celebrating vandals destroyed it by fire on July fourth, nineteen hundred. As for the Ford Store, it carried a carefully selected assortment of domestic and imported merchandise for almost every purpose. It is definitely established as the first department store in New England, and is, as a matter of fact, thought to be the first department store ever established in America.

There is still preserved a purchase made at the store on the first day of its opening by the brothers Nathaniel, James and Peleg. The purchase was made by a Joseph Simmons, and is interesting as a comparison with prices of the articles as they might be bought today, and also because they show on that first day the remarkable variety of articles sold in America's first department store. Here are the articles and their prices;

Four gallons of molasses, a dollar and thirty five cents; fourteen pounds of sugar, a dollar sixty one cents; two pounds of tea, a dollar and twelve cents; one gallon of New England rum, thirty eight cents; one quire of paper, twenty cents; two pairs of shoes, ninety eight cents; two papers of needles, fourteen cents; a quarter of a pound of tobacco, five cents.

That this was a real department store may be readily seen by the fact that the Ford brothers sold the following articles: logwood, plows, aloes, hay cutters, Epson salts.

whale oil, night caps, bibles, powder and shot, nails, pills, tents, wigs, meat, candy and fishhooks. In its most prosperous days this business amounted to ~~h~~ hundred and fifty thousand dollars annually. ~~thexxkuxstore~~

This old store was originally bought by Eleaser³ Harlow in 1826. For some time it had been used as a hatter's shop. When the three Ford brothers bought it from Harlow, they enlarged it from time to time until it measured one hundred and twenty eight feet in length and twenty one feet in width. These additions were not the usual enlargement such as is made today with the advice of an architect. With Yankee frugality, whenever more space was needed Nathaniel, James and Peleg bought up some old building and attached it to the north end of the store.

Duxburites are fond of recalling their ~~now living,~~ visits to the store, and they speak somewhat wistfully of its pungent odor - a mixture of molasses, kerosene and rum. There was, they say, a delightful mystery about the place, savoring of pirates and rum, and Duxbury children always liked to be sent to the store.

The goods which stocked the old store were brought from Boston twice a year, in packets owned by the firm, which made a landing near where Duxbury is now located. The stage of Sprague and Jones bought small supplies from Boston between stocking up periods. Jones drove the stage, and it was his boast that he could remember the destination of all express articles up to the number of fifty. On busy days where there were more than fifty packages, he was forced to quit his memory and keep tally with pencil and paper.

In 1853, after the death of James T. Ford, the firm name was changed to Nathaniel Ford and Sons, and for a number of years, up to the building of the railroad from Boston to Duxbury, in 1871, the store did a tremendous business. The railroad proved real competition as many purchasers chose to ride into Boston for commodities. Business went on the down grade. After the death of the last Ford son, attempts, not altogether successful, were made to carry on the business until finally the store was burned to the ground in 1921. Miss Harriet J. Ford and her sister, Miss Florence G. Ford, descendants of the original owners, still live in Duxbury. Their home is filled with rare china and antiques.

Next week there will be another story forthcoming of early Duxbury days, as told by the Duxbury Tercentenary Committee.